ABOUT ENGLISH POETRY

By G. F. BRADBY

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By

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PREFACE

IN these few pages I have tried to do for others what, in my youth, I should have liked somebody else to do for me: namely, to discuss quite briefly some of the many interesting questions which arise in connexion with the study of Poetry. It is not easy to be concise without seeming to be dogmatic; but my object has been, not so much to maintain a thesis, as to start the reader on a voyage of discovery for himself. He may not share my preferences nor agree with my conclusions, but, if he should find his curiosity aroused or his interest quickened, I shall feel that my attempt was justified.

G. F. B.

CONTENTS

1. Why we read Poetry 1
2. What is Poetry? 11
3. The Beauty of Significance . . 22
4. The Beauty of Restraint . . 30
5. The Beauty of Rhythm 42
6. The Beauty of Melody 53
7. The Magic of Words 63
8. The Right Attitude towards Poetry 70

I

WHY WE READ POETRY

POETS are born, not made; and such births are comparatively rare. Yet it is probably true that nine people out of every ten, though they are not poets, are capable of understanding and enjoying poetry—not *all* poetry, but at least *some* poetry, including much that bears the rather formidable label of 'Classic'. That is to say, the ordinary man, though often he does not know it, has in him something of the poet, something which is at least capable of responding to the particular kind of appeal out of which poetry is made. For the poet is not fashioned out of another clay than our own. He differs from us chiefly in this, that he sees more vividly, and feels more intensely, things which we see and feel vaguely and obscurely; and, further, he has the gift of expressing his vision and his feelings in a form in which they become intelligible to others. When this gift is exercised in a perfect and convincing way, we say that the poet is inspired. It was with good reason that in ancient times the bard was also called the Seer, the man who saw deeper into life than his fellows, and who was able to interpret it to them, and make them see it with his own eyes. A poet, indeed, is always a seer. This does not mean that every poet 'sees life steadily and sees

it whole'; but it does mean that at some particular point, or points, his experience of life is deeper and richer than that of the ordinary man. And, at the same time, more real. No poetry is lasting unless the appeal which it makes is a universal appeal. In other words, the experience, if it is to become the stuff out of which great poetry is made, must be in harmony with the facts of life and of human nature.

If this is true, it is obvious that poetry has much to teach us, which it would be profitable for us to know. But this is equally true of History and Philosophy and Natural Science and any other branch of learning. What makes poetry different from any one of these is that, when we read and understand it, we are conscious of a particular kind of pleasure, difficult to analyse, but very real, which we do not associate with the study of any other form of literature.

It is not always easy to convince the 'plain man' (especially if he is proud of his plainness) that this pleasure is not a perquisite of the intellectual, nor a pose of the high-brow, but one which nearly all men are capable of feeling, and which is therefore probably within his own range. But it may perhaps help him, if we state, very briefly, why those who read poetry do so, and what they expect to get from it.

In the first place, there is the pleasure of the mere sound, the pleasure of rhythm, of rhyme,

of the melodious use of words: a pleasure which has something in common with that which we derive from music. But, though this appeal to the ear is never absent and can never be ignored, the essential appeal of poetry is an appeal to the understanding through the emotions. Lest the plain man should imagine that an emotional appeal necessarily implies something of a violently disturbing nature, it may be well to explain that by 'the emotions' we mean practically what he is accustomed to call his 'heart' as contrasted with his head. By way of example we may take two simple and positive statements:

(*a*) Twice two is four.

(*b*) 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy.'

Of these (*a*) is an appeal to our intellect pure and simple: nobody could make poetry out of the multiplication tables; whereas (*b*) is an appeal to our intellect through the memories and feelings which are associated in our minds with the words Heaven and infancy. If we are to understand it, we must make, not merely an intellectual effort, but an imaginative effort; and imagination has its roots in feeling.

By its appeal to our understanding through our emotions poetry does several things for us. At its greatest it reveals to us new aspects of truth and new forms of beauty. Sometimes it expresses for us, in a way which we at once recognize to be true, vague thoughts and emotions of which we

have been half conscious, though we have never been able to put them into words or realize them as part of our own attitude to life. In other words, it explains us to ourselves, and increases our knowledge of that side of us (what we may call our imaginative side) which does not, perhaps, often come into play in our daily occupations, but which is, none the less, an essential part of our being, and which we neglect at our peril. Or the poet may merely express for us in a perfect form (*a*) some aspect of natural beauty, or (*b*) some fact about life, with which we were already familiar, but which we could only put into inadequate and commonplace language. For example :

(*a*) 1. While the still morn went out with sandals grey.
2. While barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day.
3. And Autumn laying here and there
A fiery finger on the leaves.
4. O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing.

(*b*) 1. How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds
Makes ill deeds done.
2. Oh the little more and how much it is,
And the little less and what worlds away.
3. Authority forgets a dying king.
4. Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

We used the phrase '*merely* express for us', but in truth the perfect expression gives to the thought expressed something which lifts it out of the region of the commonplace into the realm of beauty.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of the gifts which poetry has to bestow, but only a rough indication of their nature and of their value. Briefly, we may perhaps say that one of the chief effects of poetry is both to explain to us, and to deepen, our experience of life on its emotional side.

But, at this point, the plain man will probably ask—and the question is a perfectly reasonable one—'Why cannot this effect be produced equally well in prose, which is not only easier to write, but also much easier to understand?'

Now it is perfectly true that, under certain conditions, prose can do all that is achieved by poetry. We will take four examples: from the Gospels, from the Book of Common Prayer, from *Hamlet*, and from *Romola* respectively.

(*a*) Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

(*b*) O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee; mercifully grant, that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(*c*) Not a whit; we defy augury: there is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all.

(*d*) Go not down, good Spirit! for the changes are great and the speech of Florentines would sound as a riddle in your ears. Or, if you go, mingle with no politicians on the *marmi* or elsewhere; ask no questions about trade in the Calimara; confuse yourself with no inquiries into scholarship, official or monastic. Only look at the sunlight and shadows on the grand walls that were built solidly, and have endured in their grandeur; look at the faces of the little children, making another sunlight amid the shadows of age; look, if you will, into the churches, and hea the same chants, see the same images as of old—the images of willing anguish for a great end, of beneficent love and ascending glory; see upturned living faces, and lips moving to the old prayers for help. These things have not changed. The sunlight and shadows bring their old beauty and waken the old heart-strains at morning, noon, and eventide; the little children are still the symbol of the eternal marriage between love and duty; and men still yearn for the reign of peace and righteousness—still own *that* life to be the highest which is a conscious voluntary sacrifice. For the Pope Angelico is not come yet.

In all these passages there is beauty, rhythm, and an appeal to the understanding through the emotions; they are as easy to learn by

heart as any poem, and they produce all the effect of poetry. Indeed, it is difficult to fix the limitations of poetical prose, to say exactly when, or why, it ceases to be the best medium for the expression of poetic thought. But that it has such limitations is evident. For a perfect poem is not an elaborate and arbitrary way of saying something which might have been said more simply and as effectively in prose. The least poetical reader is conscious that such a poem loses its magic, if it is translated into prose, however poetical that prose may be. Which means that its beauty depends, not only on the thought expressed, nor on the language used to express it, but also on the form into which the thought and the language are cast. Form in poetry is an essential part of its beauty.

It is unnecessary to labour so obvious a point. Take, for example,

> Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
> The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
> Hath had elsewhere its setting
> And cometh from afar.

No prose rendering could possibly embody the full significance of these lines. English literature is rich in great poetry, but our poetry remains a national asset of which we make comparatively little use. Most of us are taught some poetry at school—not always very inspiringly; many people keep expensively-bound volumes of the great poets on their bookshelves;

some bestow similar volumes as wedding presents on their friends, or as birthday gifts on their godchildren ; few, after leaving school or the Universities, ever read poetry for their pleasure.

The reasons for this neglect are, I think, not far to seek. In the first place, if we wish to understand poetry which is new to us, we are nearly always obliged to make a concentrated mental effort, a much greater effort, in fact, than that which is required for almost any other kind of reading, except philosophy. And concentrated mental effort is not the kind of recreation which appeals to most men after a hard day's work.

In the second place, every poem expresses a certain mood and a particular attitude to life. If we are to understand the poem we must capture that mood and identify ourselves with that attitude. But this often involves a rather violent switching off from our immediate surroundings and our preoccupations of the moment. In a Surrey copse on a May evening, or on the Cornish cliffs in an October gale, Keats's Ode to a Nightingale, or Shelley's to the West Wind, might immediately strike in us a responsive chord. But in some uninspiring room, with street noises, a loud speaker, or jazz music in our ears, the case is different. For this and similar reasons we cannot always be sure, even though we may happen to be fond of poetry,

that the effort required of us will meet with its reward. The poem that we wish to study may make a demand on our imaginative powers, which at the given moment is beyond them. And our consciousness of this possibility deters us from making the attempt.

And, lastly, poetry does not lend itself to rapid reading, and, by thirty, most readers of books have acquired that rather fatal habit. One cannot tear the heart out of a poem, as one can tear it out of a detective story, with a selective eye and a brisk turning of the pages. If we are to get from poetry the full enjoyment which it is capable of giving, we must know it intimately—I had almost said, by heart. Any great poem, even a short one, demands a close and careful study. It would be a mistake, for instance, for anybody who is making his acquaintance with them for the first time, to read the Odes of Keats one after the other. Each has its own mood, and there is more in them than can be assimilated at one meal. There are, of course, certain kinds of poetry which can be read more rapidly than others : Epic poetry, for example, or the plays of Shakespeare, where the interest centres largely in the story. But even here there must be no skipping, and, if we are to get out of them all that we can, we must return again and again. There is a vast difference between a landscape seen from a rushing motor-car, and the same landscape as

seen by the artist who is painting it. An intimate knowledge of a few great poems is more profitable than a nodding acquaintance with many.

All this may sound more like a warning to avoid poetry, than an encouragement to pursue it. But that is certainly not its purpose. It is only intended to suggest to those who have not yet acquired a taste for poetry, how they may best begin; and the suggestion is that they should begin in small doses, and, if possible, learn something by heart. For a great poem, whether it be a long or a short one, which we have assimilated and really made our own, is a possession for ever, a constant source of delight, and a key which opens many doors. And one thing is certain; the more poetry we know and love, the more we shall want to know.

2

WHAT IS POETRY?

WE have seen that prose can be poetical; but verse is not necessarily so—comic verse, for instance, the majority of hymns, and most metrical versions of the Psalms. Why then, it may be asked, should we refuse the name of 'poetry' to poetical prose, and confine it to poetical verse? The distinction, if we make it, is certainly rather an arbitrary one, for the difference is one of form only and not of quality; but it is at least a convenient distinction, because, as a matter of fact, nearly all of our English poets, guided by what seems to be a true instinct, have expressed their poetry in metre. But all such distinctions are part of a larger question, to which very different answers have been given: namely, what do we mean by 'poetical'? In fact, what *is* poetry?

It is well not to be too dogmatic on such a subject; but at the same time it is necessary to have some fairly clear idea in our minds of what we really mean when we talk of poetry. We shall try to reach an answer to this question in two steps, by considering the difference

(*a*) between prose and verse;
(*b*) between verse and poetry.

(*a*) In the first place we may note that all language, and especially the English language, is rhythmical. It is rhythmical, because we always emphasize certain words or syllables in a sentence more than others. In words of more than one syllable, we stress one of those syllables and not the others, e. g. *inévitable*, *renówn*. If the word is an unusually long one, we sometimes stress two syllables, e. g. *úninténtional*. Again, if we are speaking in monosyllables, we lay a greater emphasis on some of them than on others; 'If I'm *not* back by five, *don't* wait for me.' These alternations of what we may call long and short beats necessarily create rhythm, and the rhythmical effect is heightened by inflexions of the voice. Some French observers say of us that we never *speak*; we *sing*.

It is not, therefore, the possession of rhythm which constitutes the difference between verse and prose.

Prose is the simplest and most natural form of speech, the form in which we all learn to express our wants, our thoughts, and our feelings. It only ceases to be prose and becomes verse, when, whether by accident or design, its rhythms are combined in such a way that they form a recognizable scheme or pattern.

By way of illustration we may take what might quite well be a series of ordinary remarks at a breakfast table:

'Give me some bread, please. Don't butter it.

I hardly slept a wink last night; somebody's beastly dog was barking in the road just in front of my window.'

This is common-speech prose, pure and simple; but it has rhythm, and we can use its rhythms, or a combination of them, as the beginning of a pattern; and, if we finish the pattern, we have verse—deplorable verse, it is true, in this case, but still verse.

(*a*) *Give me some bread, please;*
Don't butter it.
What 's in your head, please
Don't utter it.

(*b*) *I hardly slept a wink last night*
And so I have no appetite.

(*c*) *Somebody's beastly dog*
Was barking in the road;
You slept like any log:
To me it was a goad.

(*d*) *Just in front of my window*
Every day at dawn,
Starlings and thrushes gather,
Clamorous, on the lawn.

Literary prose differs from the prose of common speech, not in kind, but only in quality. It is less jerky, more balanced, more careful in its choice of words and in its observance of the rules of grammar and syntax; in short, more deliberate and more polished. But it follows the same laws; and, precisely because it is

presented to us as prose, if we find in it any hint of pattern—an unintentional rhyme, complete sentences which might be written as lines of blank verse, and the like—our ear is offended. It is probably true to say that the more we are aware of balance and of rhythm, and the less we are conscious of any sort or kind of pattern, the better the prose is.

What we have here called pattern is more correctly described as metre. It can be made apparent to the eye by the way in which the words are printed, but the appeal is always to the ear, and the pleasure derived from it is one of sound, not of sight. We must think of it, therefore, as an audible pattern, of which the ear alone is judge. The eye can help the ear to follow the pattern, but it cannot delude the ear into finding an audible pattern where there is none. The device of printing words in a way which suggests the presence of such a pattern is never successful; e.g.

> Thunder
> Comes from a cloud,
> A black, ominous,
> Cloud in the
> Sky.

The ear does not hear this as metre, but only as bad prose.

How does the ear grasp the audible pattern of verse? That is not an easy question to

answer convincingly. Some people, especially unmusical people, find it harder than others to follow the audible pattern of a poem; but everybody has *some* sense of rhythm, and, as a rule, the rhythmical patterns employed in poetry are of a kind that most ears can pick out easily. Where the pattern is at all intricate, rhyme is of great assistance to the ear in following it. This, indeed, is one of the principal uses of rhyme. It serves, so to speak, to mark the edges of the pattern. By way of example, let us take a few lines from Wordsworth's *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*, and print them as prose, and without any stops:

> The rainbow comes and goes and lovely is the rose the moon doth with delight look round her when the heavens are bare waters on a starry night are beautiful and fair the sunshine is a glorious birth but yet I know where'er I go that there hath passed away a glory from the earth.

I believe that the least trained ear would follow the pattern without any conscious effort, and that the reader, or listener, would be able to write out the lines in their proper poetical form.

And now; while altering the rhythm and the wording as little as possible, let us take out all the rhymes:

> The rainbow comes and goes the rose is lovely still the moon doth with delight look round her

> when the heavens are bare waters on a night of stars are fair and beautiful the sunshine is a glorious birth but yet I know go where I may that there has passed away a glory from the world.

In this case, I think that the ordinary reader or listener would find it considerably more difficult to pick out the metrical pattern. Certainly that pattern would give him less pleasure.

But verse does not necessarily depend for its effectiveness on the use of rhyme. Much of the most beautiful poetry in our language has been written in blank verse, which is at once the easiest kind of metre to write badly, and the hardest to write well. It may be described as follows: consecutive lines of ten syllables each, divided into five Iambic feet:

$$\cup - \mid \cup - \mid \cup - \mid \cup - \mid \cup - \mid$$

This, to quote Prof. Gilbert Murray, is the formal or constant pattern. But the beauty of the verse depends, not on a rigid adherence to the pattern or metre, but on the skilful use of certain licences permitted within the pattern. The ear is always conscious of the underlying pattern, but the words, pronounced with their natural stresses, 'conform to it resistingly'. Thus

> To be or not to be; that is the question,

is a line of blank verse, but it is not a line either of ten syllables or of five Iambic feet.

If we may go to music for an analogy, I think we shall find one in perfect chanting of the Psalms. In this case, the chant represents the constant pattern, of which the ear is always conscious: but the words (in perfect chanting) run along it observing their own natural stresses and not those of the formal chant.

Let us take a few lines from *Hamlet* and see how this theory of blank verse applies to them.

To die: to sleep;
No more; and, by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.

Of these lines number six is the only one which conforms to the formal pattern; or nearly conforms; for it seems natural to stress both 'ay' and 'there's'. The others only partially conform, and in line nine there are not even ten syllables, 'pause' with the natural pause which we make after the word, occupying the time or space of two syllables. Yet the ear is conscious all the time of the formal pattern underneath the variations from it; so much so, that the less intelligent schoolboy will almost

certainly give the stresses in lines seven and eight as follows:

> For ín that sléep of deáth what dreáms may cóme
> When wé have shúffled óff this mórtal cóil.

And, as the less intelligent schoolboy knows nothing of patterns or Iambic feet, we are bound, I think, to infer that his ear is so conscious of the 'constant pattern' that he cannot get away from it, and forces the words to conform to it, whatever violence they may suffer in the process.

For a more perfect understanding of the problems of metre, the reader should consult Prof. Gilbert Murray's *The Classical Tradition in Poetry*, Chapter IV. We need not pursue the subject further here, except to add that in poetry there is a definite relation between form and thought. A trivial metre will not bear a solemn thought, and vice versa. The thought dictates the form, and, in a perfect poem, thought and form seem to be as inevitably part of the same thing, as are the two sides of a plate.

(*b*) The difference between prose and verse is then one of form; that between verse and poetry is less easy to define with certainty. It may even be questioned whether it is necessary to make any such distinction at all. We do, as a matter of practice, often speak of verse and poetry as if they were the same thing. On the

other hand, when we speak of 'bad verse', we practically always mean verse which is metrically faulty, and, when we speak of 'bad poetry' we mean verse which attempts to make a certain kind of appeal, and fails.

For example,

> And five times to the child I said,
> 'Why, Edward, tell me why?'

is not bad verse, but it is bad poetry.

It seems, therefore, at least legitimate to make a distinction between verse which makes, or tries to make, this appeal, and verse which has an entirely different object in view (such as parody, or Nonsense verse, or comic songs), and to call only the former 'poetry', whether it be good or bad of its kind.

We have defined this appeal as an appeal to the understanding through the emotions, in a metrical form. But such a definition of poetry, without some necessary qualification, would, apparently, oblige us to include Satire, and to exclude the didactic verse of a whole generation of eighteenth century writers. For Satire is an appeal to the understanding through the emotions: generally the least worthy of the emotions, envy, scorn, and all uncharitableness; and the didactic poets of the eighteenth century distrusted the emotions, and deliberately made their appeal to common sense—that cool, sane, balanced judgement, of which the reason is

capable, when it fixes its attention only on the known facts of life, and refuses to let itself be influenced by sentiment, or by vague, uncertain intuitions and aspirations. Wordsworth's *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality* would have been anathema to Pope; but was Pope a poet only when he wrote Satire? Are we to crown Butler's *Hudibras* and reject Pope's *Essay on Criticism*? Such a proceeding would be obviously absurd, and we must try to amend our definition.

I think that we come somewhere near to finding a solution if we say that poetry is an emotional and metrical appeal to the understanding, which awakens in us, in some form or other, a consciousness of beauty. A sense of beauty is certainly rather a vague term, and one which is not easy to define. For beauty can be felt overwhelmingly, or only faintly and uncertainly. But it is more important that we should feel it, than that we should be able to analyse it: and I believe that we do feel it, though in very varying degrees, when we are reading, and understanding, poetry.

If we are content to accept this admittedly loose definition, as a working hypothesis, we shall find that it is more inclusive than might at first sight seem to be probable. It is true that it will exclude a great deal of Satire, for there is no beauty in bitterness, however polished. But it will include a great deal of eighteenth-century verse; for there is a certain

kind of beauty in the perfect use of language, when it is expressing something that is worth saying. And, as a matter of fact, when we look into the matter a little more closely, we generally find that the eighteenth-century poets, though they meant to ignore the emotions, could not really get away from them.

> A little learning is a dangerous thing;
> Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:

was, no doubt, intended as an appeal to common sense. But, instead of saying 'Read much', Pope uses the metaphor 'drink deep', which has distinctly emotional associations; behind 'the Pierian spring' lies all the romance of Greek legend; and even 'dangerous' suggests something much more emotionally formidable than the fact that, if we only dabble in learning, we shall probably make fools of ourselves.

In any case, it is better not to try to fix the boundary line between verse and poetry too rigidly. One reader may feel beauty where another does not. Unlike 'a little learning', a little latitude is not always 'a dangerous thing'. What is certain is, that in all great poetry there is beauty; and, if we have faith in poetry, we believe that it is able to reveal its beauty to all but the tenth man.

3

THE BEAUTY OF SIGNIFICANCE

WE are now free to consider some of the things in poetry which we feel as beauty; and foremost amongst these, I think, comes significance. Not that all poetry is significant, at least not in any obvious way; but certainly much of what is greatest in it possesses this quality in a high degree.

In order to make clear what is meant here by significance, we will take a few examples of it from the ordinary experiences of life.

Somebody makes a remark to us. We hear the words clearly, and understand what they mean. At the same time, we have a conviction that the speaker really meant more than he actually said. The words were significant of something in his mind, of which we do not possess the key.

Among our memories of childhood, some which stand out with peculiar vividness seem to possess no relevance or importance at all: trifling incidents which led to nothing, and of a kind of which we must have experienced thousands which are now entirely forgotten. Yet they have been indelibly printed on our

brain, and we feel sure that they must be significant of something in ourselves, which we do not altogether understand.

We see a sunset—not a particularly sensational one, but it leaves an impression on us which other sunsets have not made. We have felt something which we do not usually feel when watching sunsets, however beautiful: something which was not due merely to a particular arrangement of clouds, or a particular effect of light or colour. We feel as if this sunset had actually told us something new, though we cannot exactly say what. We can only say that it was significant.

Now poetry may be significant in several ways.

(1) Where we have already felt significance, consciously or half-consciously, it may explain for us the reason why. Let us take an example. Among flowers, the daffodil is a universal favourite. There are obvious reasons why it should be so. It comes in spring and has all the cheerful associations of that season; it has a beautiful shape; it suggests sunshine; its vivid colour is exhilarating after the drab browns and greys of winter. Yet all this does not quite account for the particular feeling which we have about the daffodil. The flower is significant of something more than the pleasure of spring and sunshine: something which we cannot quite grasp and put into words.

Then, perhaps, we come across these lines in the *Winter's Tale*—

> Daffodils
> That come before the swallow *dares*, and take[1]
> The winds of March with beauty;

and the mystery is solved. It is just this suggestion of audacity in the daffodil, this combination of delicate and yet sturdy beauty braving the rough weather and seeming to lay a spell on it, which give to the flower its special appeal.

(2) Poetry may again deepen, without necessarily explaining, a feeling of significance of which we are always aware. It is not uncommon to hear people making cheap and even cynical remarks about birth and new-born babies; but, at bottom, everybody is moved by the mere fact of birth. All the mystery of life, the uncertainty about its meaning, its greatness and its littleness, its infinite possibilities and strange limitations, confront us in the cradle. Wordsworth felt the mystery and sought an explanation:

> Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
> The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
> Hath had elsewhere its setting
> And cometh from afar;
> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,

[1] i.e. bewitch.

But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home;
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But he beholds the light and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away
And fade into the light of common day.

The explanation may not convince us intellectually, but it is conveyed in a form which cannot fail to deepen our sense of the significance of birth.

(3) And sometimes poetry creates a significance of its own. Certain lines haunt our memory in a peculiar way. We know what they mean; but they seem to mean more than they actually say. It is not merely the thought expressed, nor the beauty of the way in which it is expressed that arrests us. There is something else about them, which fixes them in our memory. They seem to be charged with significance.

Perhaps the following quotations may serve as an illustration of what is meant:

(*a*) Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;

Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,
Can touch him further. (*Macbeth.*)

(*b*) Now is the lofty column broke,
The beacon's fire is quenched in smoke,
The trumpet's silver voice is still,
The warder silent on the hill. (Sir W. Scott.)

(*c*) Hence, in a season of calm weather,
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither;
Can in a moment travel thither—
And see the children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.
(Wordsworth.)

It is natural, perhaps, that we should be predisposed to find significance, where the theme is death or immortality; but the same quality can be found in poetry that deals with quite other subjects; for instance, in these lines from Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*:

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Very few people, I think, could say exactly why they find these lines so haunting, or why they

regard them as among the most beautiful in English poetry.

In all of these cases, if we have felt significance, we have felt it as beauty. And, at its greatest, poetry gives us some insight into the significance of beauty itself.

We all feel beauty with very varying degrees of intensity. The artist may feel it as a passion, a call to service and self-sacrifice ; the ordinary man, only as a pleasant element in his environment. What one man calls beautiful, another will describe as pretty, and this admission may hardly amount to more than an intellectual assent. He does not feel emotionally about it. He will grant that some wild-flowers are very jolly, very pretty, and others, rather pretty; but he cannot see why a poet should rave about a celandine, which, after all, is only a weed; still less why 'the meanest flower that blows' should give him 'thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears'. Yet the day may come, when, as he is lying on the grass and thinking of nothing, his eye will come to rest on some quite small and common flower, and he will suddenly become intensely and emotionally aware that this tiny thing is a miracle of beauty and design.

I imagine that most people have had this overwhelming experience of beauty at least once in their lives. It has probably come to them in some form of natural beauty, connected

with mountains, or sea, or sunsets. The effect is always the same. It reduces men to a gasp, or to silence: it stirs in them a strange feeling of awe, of reverence, almost of worship. They are bewildered, and, perhaps, a little ashamed of themselves for feeling so intensely. 'Am I, too,' they ask themselves, 'losing my balance and my common sense, and growing morbid, emotional, hysterical?' And they try to reassure themselves by making some trivial or flippant remark.

But there is no call for shame, or even for bewilderment; for, if Beauty is an attribute of God, the experience is, in the truest sense, a religious experience, and silence, awe, and reverence, are its fitting accompaniments. It is the function of Art to reveal beauty; and, where it succeeds in a supreme way, the achievement is often called 'divine'. Poetry, at its greatest, has the power of revealing beauty in this supreme way.

But, just because beauty is essentially a sacred thing, any kind of humbug about it is a bad form of hypocrisy. The artistic pose, the cult of beauty, not for its own sake, but for the sake of winning notoriety, or of flattering self-esteem, only serves to conceal from honest but untrained eyes the real value of Art. 'Beauty is Truth', said Keats; and insincerity about it is worse than ignorance. We do not all respond to beauty in the same way, or find it in the same

things. If, therefore, the plain man has failed to see it in any of the passages which have been quoted in this chapter, he need not be ashamed of admitting the fact frankly. Only, let him remember that the things most worth winning are seldom won with ease; and, further, that significance is not the only kind of beauty which is to be found in poetry.

4

THE BEAUTY OF RESTRAINT

THERE is an art which creates a vivid picture by a great wealth and variety of detail—the art of an exuberant imagination. Art of this kind sometimes leaves us with the impression that the artist has given free rein to his fancy and allowed it to roam where it will. But such an impression is a mistaken one. The mere multiplication of detail does not make for vividness, but for confusion. The details employed must be the right details for producing the particular effect aimed at. In other words, there must be selection. Art is always the result of a controlled and disciplined imagination. There can be no art without selection; and selection implies a conscious and self-imposed restraint on the part of the artist. This is universally true, wherever the effect aimed at can, in any sense, be called artistic. It is true even of conversation. Many a man spoils his story by an inability to decide whether the event which he is relating happened on a Monday or a Tuesday, in March or in April, though neither day nor month is relevant to the point.

Art, therefore, always aims at avoiding the irrelevant. A painter, painting a landscape,

tries to convey to others the particular impression which that landscape has made on himself; and he does so, not by painting everything that he sees, but by ignoring whatever is out of harmony with that impression, and by emphasizing whatever is most in harmony with it. Art is never photographic.

In like manner, a poet does not tell us *all* that he sees, or thinks, or feels. He selects; and his success depends on his making a right selection. It is true that, as poets usually have very fertile imaginations, they are particularly exposed to the temptation of saying too much—women poets especially. Most people, I think, would agree that Mrs. Browning's beautiful poem *He giveth his beloved sleep* would be more beautiful still, if it had been shorter; that is to say, if she had applied the principle of selection more rigorously. But, though opinions may differ as to what is, or is not, redundant, at least in a perfect poem we are always conscious that the poet has said, out of the abundance of his heart, exactly what was necessary—and no more.

This does not mean that great poetry is the result of a kind of process of boiling down. It only means that, in a perfect poem, or a perfect stanza, or a perfect line, we feel that nothing could be added to, or taken from, it, without impairing our sense of its completeness and perfection. And, in producing that feeling of

completeness, selection plays a very important part.

With the *Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics* in his hands, the reader can discover for himself how the principle of selection is employed in the making of poetry; but perhaps it will help him to do so, if we take a couple of illustrations from that volume.

We will begin with Keats's *Ode to Autumn*, a poem in which the art of an exuberant imagination reveals itself very clearly. When we think of Autumn, many things suggest themselves to our memory: first and foremost, I suppose, fading and falling leaves, then, perhaps, harvest, calm sunny days, and the first frosts at night: gossamers floating in the air: storms and whirling leaves: a scent of dampness and decay, decreasing days, a sense of the end of summer and the approach of winter: in short, a medley of conflicting feelings and emotions, as our memory skips from one aspect of Autumn to another. And, perhaps, if we were set to write a poem about Autumn, we should try to bring them all in, forgetting that, if a poem is to succeed, there must be unity of feeling in it. Almost certainly, and at whatever cost, we should drag in the fading and the falling leaf.

Now let us see how Keats handles the theme.

> Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
> Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun,
> Conspiring with him how to load and bless

With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'erbrimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the last swath and all its twinéd flowers;
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are
they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barréd clouds bloom the soft-dying day
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

The opening line strikes the key-note of the poem: 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness'. The mood is a mood of tranquil enjoyment. A windless, sunlit, fecundity—that is how Keats, for the moment, feels the poetry of Autumn. Falling leaves, the 'wild West Wind' which to Shelley was 'the breath of Autumn's being', belong to a different mood, and find no place in this poem. The beauty that is revealed to us is the beauty of completeness and fulfilment; even the mists strike no chill; they only emphasize the stillness of the air. They are like the dew which went up from the ground in the Garden of Eden, and made it fertile.

The first stanza gives us a sense of genial warmth and immense fertility: grapes clustering on cottage walls, branches bending under the weight of apples, fruit ripening everywhere, an unending growth of late flowers for the bees, and hives oozing honey—a wealth of detail, but all carefully chosen to produce the same effect.

The second stanza, while still keeping us in close touch with the rich abundance of Autumn, makes us feel more particularly its sunny, dreamy spaciousness, in which time almost ceases to count, and the hours move slowly on in a calm and blissful content. And in order to produce this effect, Keats, by a real stroke of genius, suddenly personifies Autumn for us, as a vague figure, sitting *careless* on a granary

floor, or watching the slow drippings from a cider-press, or as a reaper, *sound asleep* on a half-reaped furrow, or as a gleaner crossing a brook, laden with the spoils of harvest. This is the perfect stanza of the poem.

The last stanza deliberately invites a comparison with Spring, and that too in respect of its songs. Apart from its storms, we generally associate Autumn with silence; but, when we are put to it, we remember the robin, and certain evening sounds which we connect with farms and village life. Two beautiful lines take us into evening. Then, perhaps, if we remain critical, we may feel a little disappointed with the 'music'; Keats seems to have missed one note, which Tennyson caught:

> the noise of rooks
> That gather in the waning woods;

and I expect that most readers feel a slight jolt at 'loud bleat from hilly bourn'. The truth is that even the greatest poets are sometimes put out of their stride by the stumbling-block of rhyme. Possibly, too, we have a suspicion that it was his audacious challenge to Spring which led Keats into describing as 'full-grown lambs' what we should have called sheep. But we cannot but admire the instinct which told him that certain insects can only be brought into poetry through the sound they make.[1] 'Wailful' and

[1] Cf. 'the murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves'. Browning tried to make poetry out of the flight of the

'mourn' do not here strike any discordant note, because the gnat is too small and impersonal a thing to excite sympathy. The poem ends beautifully with the robin whistling in a cottage garden, while 'gathering swallows twitter in the skies'—though it may be doubted whether their twittering has much claim to be regarded as part of the 'music' of Autumn.

To dissect a beautiful poem, as a botanist dissects a flower, is, for the moment, to destroy its beauty. But there must be dissection, if we are to discover structure, or, as in this case, the principle of selection. So we offer no apology, and pass on to our second example, Browning's *Two in the Campagna*.

This is an exceedingly beautiful, and also an exceedingly wistful, love-poem. The underlying idea is a sense of the eternal conflict in man between what seem to be the blind forces of Nature and the yearnings of his spirit; and this sense is heightened by the setting of the poem—the Roman Campagna, where Nature has been allowed to run wild over the ruins of a great civilization.

Now to create what is called 'atmosphere' is always one of the most difficult and delicate tasks in literature, and one that demands pre-eminently a right selection among the materials

midge and speaks of a 'bridge', '*whirled over* by the midge' —and the effect is very nearly bathos.

at hand. This is how Browning makes his choice:

> The champaign with its endless fleece
> Of feathery grasses everywhere!
> Silence and passion, joy and peace,
> An everlasting wash of air—
> Rome's ghost since her decease.
>
> Such life here, through such lengths of hours,
> Such miracles performed in play,
> Such primal naked forms of flowers,
> Such letting Nature have her way
> While Heaven looks from its towers!

Without knowing the Campagna, anybody can feel in these lines the hand of a great artist.

No artist is always at his highest level, and poets are no exception to the rule. In his earlier phases before he had learnt to exercise self-restraint and put a bridle on his fancy, Shakespeare himself was sometimes guilty of saying too much. But always, at his greatest, he was a master of economy in the use of words and images. To realize how much he could achieve and with how few touches, we need only turn to the well-known lines in the *Merchant of Venice*:

> The moon shines bright: in such a night as this,
> When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees
> And they did make no noise, in such a night
> Troilus methinks mounted the Troyan walls,
> And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents,
> Where Cressid lay that night.

A lesser poet would hardly have ventured to begin with so simple a phrase as 'The moon shines bright', an almost commonplace remark, with nothing clever or subtle about it. Yet, in their context, the words are exactly right. In less than six full lines Shakespeare has made us feel the fragrant silence of a perfect night, romance, and the passion of young love breathing through both; and the result is sheer beauty.

The three examples quoted above are only typical of what is always happening in poetry, namely, selection, which is itself the result of a self-imposed restraint. The reader is seldom aware of this restraint; nor is he meant to be. The greater the artist, the less we are conscious of his art, and his achievements have a deceptive air of ease and inevitability.

But there is another kind of restraint of which the reader is often more definitely aware: the restraint which takes the form of reticence. There are times when we are conscious, not only that the poet's emotion is a disciplined emotion, but that he is deliberately expressing it in terms which fall short of what he is actually feeling. The truth is, of course, that deep feeling is far more moving when it is under perfect control and using the simplest language, than when it is poured out in a passionate flood of words. This kind of reticence gives us a sense of power, of dignity, and often of pathos. There is a striking instance of this in the

opening lines of the third book of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton is speaking of his own blindness. The whole passage is too long to quote; we will begin at line 40:

> . . . . . Thus with the year
> Seasons return; but not to me returns
> Day, or the sweet approach of even or morn,
> Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose,
> Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;
> But cloud instead and ever-during dark
> Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men
> Cut off, and, for the book of knowledge fair,
> Presented with a universal blank
> Of Nature's works, to me expunged and rased,
> And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out.
> So much the rather thou, Celestial Light,
> Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
> Irradiate; there plant eyes; all mist from thence
> Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
> Of things invisible to mortal sight.

We feel that this is great poetry; it is, indeed, one of the most moving passages in English literature. Yet, if we look at it closely, we find that Milton has made no attempt to avoid the obvious. Blindness is just the inability to see daylight, flowers, flocks, herds, faces; and the inevitable privation to a scholar of not being able to read. These are things which anybody could say about blindness, without having had any personal experience of it. The epithets used are few and conventional—sweet, cheerful, fair. There is no subtlety,

nothing sensational, nothing particularly revealing; and the language is of the simplest. Yet the total effect is that of great power, great depth of feeling, great pathos. We feel all these behind the reticence, pulsing through the superb but restrained rhythm.[1]

Only the greatest masters can produce these astonishing effects with the simplest means; but reticence and simplicity, whatever their context, are always more arresting and suggestive than exaggeration. It would be going too far to say that poetry is great in proportion to its simplicity, for it covers the whole field of emotional experience. There are thoughts, for example, which cannot be expressed in simple language; and there are forms of beauty in which a certain vagueness is a part of the beauty. Nor is it true, as Wordsworth sometimes mistakenly believed, that mere simplicity can make good poetry; it often makes bald poetry. But it is true (1) that obscurity is never a merit, and (2) that in many, if not most, of the greatest moments in poetry, the thought does come through in very simple language. This is particularly the case with Shakespeare. It is true of Shelley's *Adonais*:

> He has outsoar'd the shadow of our night;
> Envy and calumny and hate and pain,

[1] Musicians tell me that this can happen also in pure music, i.e. music unrelated to words, especially in Bach.

> And that unrest which men miscall delight,
> Can touch him not and torture not again,

is much greater poetry than—

> Most musical of mourners, weep anew!
> Not all to that bright station dared to climb;
> And happier they their happiness who knew,
> Whose tapers yet burn through that night of time
> In which suns perished.

It is true of Wordsworth. It is true of Robert Browning who had a tendency to wrap his thoughts in obscurity. It is true of Tennyson, especially of *In Memoriam*. It is the reason why the fourth stanza of Keats's *Ode to a Grecian Urn* is more compelling than the others.

But it is unnecessary to prolong the list. The essential point to notice is, that often, when we are most conscious of beauty in poetry, we are also aware of a certain reticence behind it, which refuses to be flamboyant, and uses the simplest language and the simplest imagery. In other words, there can be beauty in restraint.

5

THE BEAUTY OF RHYTHM

IN a previous chapter we said that all language is rhythmical, and that verse may be defined as language following an audible rhythmical pattern. Before we proceed any farther, we had better try to look a little closer into the nature of rhythm.

We hear rhythm as a succession of beats of greater or less intensity, of longer or shorter duration, with pauses between them. If the beats are more than a certain distance apart (as, for instance, when a clock is striking midnight, or a funeral bell is tolling), we hear them, not as rhythm, but as isolated sounds; and isolated sounds, as a rule, affect us disagreeably, because our ears are, unconsciously, always expecting rhythm. For rhythm is a constant accompaniment to life. There is rhythm in the wind, in running water, in breaking waves, in the songs of birds, in engines, in footsteps, in breathing, in all forms of music. The desire for rhythm is universal. As has already been said, we introduce rhythm into every sentence that we speak by stressing some syllables more than others. Animals seem to share this instinct: not only do birds create rhythms in

their songs, but even the ass brays rhythmically. We find it in nearly all the sounds that reach our ears, and, if we do not find it, we often make it. This desire for rhythm amounts sometimes to an objectionable craving, as when a fidgetty man beats rhythms on the arm of a chair with his fingers, or on the floor with his feet. Speaking roughly, it may be said that the more varied the beats and pauses are, the better our ears are pleased. As a result of this, we often unconsciously create variations where there actually are none. For instance, we hear the even beats of a clock as Trochees, or as Iambics, i.e. long-short, or short-long; and we do the same thing with water dripping quickly from a tap, and probably with many other sounds in Nature.

We inevitably connect rhythm with changes of tone, because a strong beat makes a different sound from that produced by a short beat. If the tones are loud, harsh, and unmusical they destroy our pleasure in the rhythm which they accompany. Heard in the far distance, an aeroplane has quite an agreeable rhythm; immediately overhead, it becomes an intolerable noise. And the same thing is true of most machinery. Most people have an unconscious tendency, whenever such a thing is possible, to translate tones into musical notes, and so to convert rhythm into tune. But we must not confuse tone with tune. There is always rhythm

in tune, but tune is something which grows out of rhythm. There is no *tune*, for example, in thunder, nor in the beating of a drum, though both combine tone and rhythm in a marked degree.

We may further notice that certain combinations of long and short beats lead us to expect that certain other beats will follow them. To take an elementary example, we expect Dúm-diddy to be followed by Dúm. This kind of expectation, of which we are particularly conscious in music, extends also to language, and has much to do with the formation of style. If a sentence which begins with a long, flowing rhythm ends abruptly, or in a succession of unrhythmical monosyllables, our ear is disappointed and, consequently, offended. The difference between 'The Angel of Death has been abroad throughout the land; you may almost hear the beating of his wings', and 'the Angel of Death has been abroad throughout the land; you may almost hear his wings beat', is a difference only of sound and not of sense; yet the loss of rhythmical balance is so great and so unexpected, that it gives our ears a most unpleasant shock, and converts eloquence into baldness. Indeed, this neglect of an expected rhythmical balance is so disconcerting that it is sometimes used deliberately, in order to produce a comic effect; as in Calverley's lines on the word 'Forever'.

> Forever: 'tis a single word;
> Our rude forefathers deem'd it two;
> Can you imagine so absurd
> A view?

The fact that different rhythms affect us in different ways can generally be explained as the result of association. Quick light rhythms suggest dancing, or running water, and are exciting and cheerful. Slow measured rhythms suggest solemnity, or sadness. Poetry, like music, takes account of this, and adapts the metre to the thought. Contrast, for example,

> Hark, hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings,
> And Phoebus 'gins arise,

with

> The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.

A didactic poem in a lyrical metre would be an absurdity; so would a lyric in heroic couplets. But it is quite possible, under certain conditions, to enjoy the mere rhythm of a poem without attaching any very precise meaning to the words. Children certainly do so; and adults may have the same experience in reading Swinburne or Browning, though, as a rule, their more imperious demand for sense will not allow them to enjoy rhythm, pure and simple, in poetry as they can enjoy it in music. We will take an example from Browning who, though he is sometimes obscure, and some-

times unmelodious, was always a great master of rhythm.

Savage I was sitting in my house, late, lone :
Dreary, weary with the long day's work :
Head of me, heart of me, stupid as a stone :
Tongue-tied now, now blaspheming like a Turk ;
When, in a moment, just a knock, call, cry,
Half a pang, and all a rapture, there again were we !—
'What, and is it really you again ?' quoth I :
'I again, what else did you expect ?' quoth She.

If the reader will simply repeat these lines to himself, without troubling himself to find any particular meaning to the words, he will find a wonderful rhythm in them, and will, I think, derive a particular pleasure from the three long beats at the end of line 5. Or, if this should fail to please him, he may turn to any book of Nonsense Verse, and light, perhaps, on such lines as :

They sailed away in a Sieve, they did,
In a Sieve they sailed so fast,
With only a beautiful pea-green veil
Tied with a riband, by way of a sail,
To a small tobacco-pipe mast ;
And every one said, who saw them go,
'O won't they be soon upset, you know !
For the sky is dark, and the waves are long,
And happen what may, it 's extremely wrong
In a Sieve to sail so fast ! '

Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

The rhythm of these lines gives us a definitely aesthetic pleasure, and it is the incongruity of this with the absence of any serious meaning in them, which makes them amusing.

Lively swinging metres catch the ear most easily; but they are not the ones which haunt us longest; perhaps because they are too obvious, and we are only 'haunted' by that which has in it some element of mystery. For rhythm, like words, can be suggestive, and help to create a feeling of significance. Here are some lines from an old nursery rhyme:

White swan and grey swan,
Waft your wings together,
And carry the King's daughter
Over the one-strand river.

Words and rhythm combine in these lines, in a strange way, to produce a sense of the mysterious.

We have already said that certain combinations of beats lead us to expect certain others, and this, of course, is at the bottom of all audible patterns. For instance, if the first verse of Gray's *Elegy* were written

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,

The ploughman homeward plods his way
And leaves the world to darkness and to me;

line 3 would make a disagreeable breach in the pattern. In metre it is generally the expected which gives pleasure to the ear. But it is also true that we derive even greater pleasure from the unexpected, provided that it adds to the pattern some kind of beauty for which we were not prepared. We may find an example in the Dirge from *Cymbeline*.

Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages;
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

Alter the first line to correspond exactly with the third, by substituting 'burning' for 'heat o' the', and half the beauty is gone. It is just that unexpected little lilt at the end of the line which produces the magical effect.[1] Or we may go once more to Browning:

Woe, he went galloping into the war,
Clara, Clara!
Let us two dream: shall he 'scape with a scar?
Scarcely disfigurement, rather, a grace
Making for manhood which nowise we mar:
See, while I kiss it, the flush on his face—
Rosny, Rosny!

[1] In the third stanza Shakespeare goes back to the normal rhythm. Repetition might become monotonous.

We know that 'Clara, Clara!' of line 2 will be balanced by something similar—in this case 'Rosny, Rosny!'—and we expect it, I think, to come after line 5. The introduction of another line with its rhyme to 'grace' gives an unexpected, and very delightful, turn to the pattern.

Or we may turn to Shelley's *Skylark*:

> Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
> Bird thou never wert,
> That from Heaven, or near it,
> Pourest thy full heart
> In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.
>
> Higher still and higher
> From the earth thou springest,
> Like a cloud of fire,
> The blue deep thou wingest,
> And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

The Alexandrine, with which each stanza ends, is a measured, and, often, rather a heavy line, and we hardly expect to find it associated with the quick light rhythm of the four opening lines, which suggest the flight of a bird skywards. Yet, when it comes, we accept it, and accept it with pleasure. The reason, I think, is obvious. What constitutes the difference between the song of the lark and that of all other birds, is that it is a continuous, breathless song, without a pause. Shelley uses the

Alexandrine to remind us of this, and in his hands it has no touch of heaviness. 'And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest' does suggest the flight and song of the lark in a wonderful way.

For effects of this kind we turn most naturally to lyrical poetry. But to the accustomed ear nothing, perhaps, gives such complete satisfaction as the rhythmical beauty of blank verse. Not all blank verse, for it can be the dullest and most prosaic of metres; and for a very good reason. It employs a rhythm which is often present in prose, though it does not become obvious to the ear, because it is constantly broken. Whenever we feel strongly about anything, our language always tends to become more rhythmical than usual, and the rhythm into which we fall most naturally is the rhythm of blank verse. In almost any page of any prose-writer it is possible to find sentences, or at least parts of sentences, which form a complete line of blank verse. We seldom recognize that this is happening, because the lines are generally isolated lines, and do not form part of a pattern. It might seem to the unwary (in fact, it often does) that, because its rhythm is a common speech-rhythm and requires no rhymes, blank verse is the easiest way of writing poetry. In reality it is the hardest. If the sentences are of too even a length, if the pause comes too often at the end

of a line, if the stresses latent in what we called the constant pattern would fall too frequently on words or syllables that cannot bear them, the effect is monotonous, unmusical, and dull. The pauses and the stresses must be infinitely varied, the lines must flow smoothly over the edges of the pattern into one another, and there must be no consciousness of too violent a conflict between the natural rhythm of the words and the rhythm of the constant pattern. Mere craftsmanship will not succeed unless the poet has a perfect ear for rhythm; and there have been great poets who could never write great blank verse.

We will choose our examples from two of the greatest masters of the art, Shakespeare and Milton.

(*a*) To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life 's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (*Macbeth.*)

(*b*) Nor was his name unheard or unadored
In ancient Greece; and in Ausonian land
Men called him Mulciber; and how he fell
From Heaven they fabled, thrown by angry Jove

Sheer o'er the crystal battlements: from morn
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
A summer's day, and with the setting sun
Dropt from the zenith like a falling star,
On Lemnos, th' Aegaean isle. Thus they relate,
Erring; for he with this rebellious rout
Fell long before; nor aught availed him now
To have built in Heaven high towers; nor did he
'scape
By all his engines, but was headlong sent,
With his industrious crew, to build in Hell.
(*Paradise Lost.*)

Passages like these seem to combine all that is most rhythmically beautiful in prose and metre.

6

THE BEAUTY OF MELODY

IN most of the passages quoted in the preceding chapter, the reader will no doubt have been aware of a beauty which was neither that of the rhythm nor of the thought, and he would probably describe it as melody. When we apply the word melody to poetry, we are really using an analogy; for, strictly speaking, melody is a property of music. But, as there are effects in music which have almost their exact counterpart in poetry, the analogy is an unusually close one, and we are quite justified in calling some poetry 'melodious'.

What is it then which makes us feel melody in poetry?

It is easy to say why certain lines are *un*-melodious; and there are many such, even from the pens of great poets. Shakespeare could write,

> This to me
> In dreadful secrecy impart they did;

Shelley,

> The nameless worm would now itself disown;

Browning,

> Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?

Matthew Arnold,

> Who prop, thou ask'st, in these bad days, my mind?

Milton,

> Men whose Life, Learning, Faith and pure intent
> Would have been held in high esteem with *Paul*,
> Must now be nam'd and printed Hereticks
> By shallow *Edwards* and Scotch what d'ye call:
> But we do hope to find out all your tricks.

In all these cases we feel the mechanical nature of the rhythm, and also, at least in the first four, a certain labour in pronouncing the words. They do not come trippingly off the tongue. It is like chewing grit. For some words, and combinations of words, have a more musical sound than others. 'Benediction', for instance, is a melodious word; 'Scotch what d'ye call' is *un*melodious. Letters have sounds, just as musical notes have, and certain combinations of them produce an effect which is akin either to harmony or discord.

But melody in poetry is mainly the result of a device which is an essential feature of music: namely the device of repetition. Here is an instance from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*.

> Calm and deep peace in this wide air,
> These leaves that redden to the fall;
> And in my heart, if calm at all,
> If any calm, a calm despair.

The recurrence of 'calm' like a dominant

chord, and the slight variation of phrase in 'if calm at all', 'if any calm', have their exact counterparts in music, and create a beauty which is closely associated with melody.

There are several ways in which repetition may be employed in making poetry, and, to illustrate them, we will return to Milton who, when he was not disturbed by gusts of theological passion, was the most consistently melodious of English poets. Further, we will choose our examples from *Lycidas*, the most consistently melodious of all English poems; so melodious, that a child can learn and enjoy it, with very little conception of what it all means. Indeed, the meaning often seems of quite secondary importance: even to the maturer mind. Who Lycidas was, what the 'two-handed engine' was, what is meant by 'the fable of Bellerus old', whether primroses and woodbine ever bloom together—we hardly stop to inquire. These things do not really matter. Nor does the feeling ever rise above that of a gentle pathos, except when St. Peter is brought in for a moment to denounce Catholics, whether Anglican or Roman. But the poem sings itself in our ears, rhythmical, musical, magnificent.

(*a*) Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more
Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,
I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,
And with forced fingers rude

Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
Bitter constraint and sad occasion dear
Compels me to disturb your season due;
For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer.
Who would not sing for Lycidas? he knew
Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.
He must not float upon his watery bier
Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
Without the meed of some melodious tear.

(*b*) But, oh, the heavy change, now thou art gone,
Now thou art gone, and never must return!
Thee, Shepherd, thee the woods and desert caves
With wild thyme and the gadding vine o'ergrown,
And all their echoes mourn.

(*c*) What could the Muse herself that Orpheus bore,
The Muse herself, for her enchanting son,
Whom universal nature did lament,
When by the rout that made the hideous roar
His gory visage down the stream was sent,
Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore.

In these passages we may notice three forms of repetition.

(1) There is the kind of repetition out of which the Hebrews made poetry and musicians make music, namely the repetition of an idea in a varied, or an amplified, or a contrasted form. If we turn to the *Song of Deborah*, we find such verses as the following:

Until that I, Deborah, arose:
That I arose a mother in Israel.

The kings came and fought:
Then fought the kings of Canaan
In Taanach by the waters of Megiddo.

The river of Kishon swept them away,
That ancient river, the river Kishon.

At her feet he bowed, he fell:
Where he bowed, there he fell down dead.

Through the window she looked forth, and cried,
The mother of Sisera cried through the lattice.

The affinity is obvious between these and Milton's—

For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer.

But, oh, the heavy change, now thou art gone,
Now thou art gone, and never must return!

His gory visage down the stream was sent,
Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore.

Nor is this surprising, for Milton was steeped in the poetry of the Bible, as well as in that of Greece and Rome.

(2) There is the repetition of consonant sounds in words that are fairly close together, called Alliteration. Alliteration has always pleased the ear, though newspapers have made a good thing too common by their head-lines. We find it in such phrases as, to do and to dare, dead and done with, fast and furious, pains and penalties, live and let live, between wind and water; and there is an early form of

English poetry which is purely alliterative. Here are some lines from *Piers the Ploughman*. They describe the great storm of 15 January 1362.

> The southwest winde on Saturday at evene
> Was pertliche[1] for pure pride and for no point elles[2]
> Piries[3] and plum trees were puffed to the erthe,
> In ensample, ye segges,[4] ye shulden[5] do the betters.
> Beeches and brode[6] oaks were blown to the grounde,
> Turned upward their tailles in tokenynge of drede.

Piers the Ploughman is a great poem, but Chaucer, not Langland, settled the lines which English poetry was to follow. Alliteration, however, has always persisted, in a modified form, as a musical element in verse. It is generally most successful when it is least obvious, at all events when it is not thrust too violently on our attention. For it can be made to sound heavy and artificial; e. g.

> And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste.

In this line, though it comes from one of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, Art resembles a trick too closely to be pleasing.

Milton used Alliteration in a very subtle way: so subtle, indeed, that, though we always find his verse melodious, we do not always recognize the reason why. In the first of the

[1] evidently. [2] else. [3] pear trees.
[4] mortals. [5] should. [6] broad.

passages quoted above, we catch, of course, the obvious Alliteration in 'prime' and 'peer', in 'watery' 'unwept' and 'welter'; but, unless we look closely, we may fail to notice how cunningly the letters *l* and *m* and *n* are woven into the texture of the pattern: not necessarily at the beginning of a word, nor on a stressed syllable, but in such a way that they are always making a kind of music.

> Once, more, laurels, and, once, more
> Myrtles, brown, never
> come, pluck, and
> and, fingers
> leaves, mellowing
> constraint, and, occasion
> compels, me, season
> Lycidas, prime,
> Young, Lycidas, and not, left,
> not sing Lycidas knew
> Himself, sing, build, lofty, rhyme
> must, not, float, upon,
> unwept, welter, parching, wind
> meed, some, melodious.

Nor can we help feeling that 'tear' would not have been so completely satisfactory an ending to the stanza, if it had not been preceded by 'watery'.

Again in (*c*) we notice how the obvious Alliteration of 'rout' and 'roar' is carried on more subtly in 'gory', 'stream', and 'Hebrus'.

This may seem far-fetched. It does not mean

that Milton had any deliberate scheme of consonant or vowel sounds, which he consciously applied, but that his fastidious ear automatically dictated to his brain the choice of the word which would sound most musically in its particular context. As a result of this, if for any of the words he has chosen we substitute another of equal length and similar accent, though there may be no loss to rhythm or sense, there is nearly always some loss of melody.

(3) There is rhyme, which is essentially a repetition of vowel sounds. We have seen that rhyme helps the ear to follow the audible pattern of a poem; and, as a result of this, a certain expectation of rhyme, at certain points, is set up in the ear. This expectation is always strongest at the end of the closing line of a verse or stanza; for rhyme has a peculiarly clinching effect. In this respect it resembles what in music are called cadences—recognizable resting-points in the musical pattern; and, wherever rhyme has this affinity with a cadence, our ear demands a perfect rhyme. For instance, in the first stanza of the *Ode to a Skylark* 'near it' is made to rhyme with 'spirit', 'heart' with 'wert'; but at the cadence we are given the perfect rhyme of 'art' with 'heart'.

In Milton's use of rhyme we may notice one thing which is only true of the most melodious poets. He is able to create the expectation of rhyme and yet cheat our ears, without being

detected. *Lycidas* leaves most people under the impression that *all* the lines are rhymed; as a matter of fact there are ten unrhymed endings—two of them in the first stanza (quoted above as (*a*)), 'more' and 'wind'—which here we inevitably pronounce with a long *i*, wīnd. We are easily led to forget 'more' in the wealth of rhyme that follows it. In the case of 'wind', we have become familiar with the vowel sound in 'prime' and 'rhyme', and, though we do not accept it as rhyme for either, we have a vague idea that there has been some rhyming word earlier in the stanza. If we pronounce it 'wĭnd', I think we at once feel that there is 'some hidden want'.

We may notice two things about rhyme generally.

(*a*) The expectation of rhyme varies greatly with the individual. Some ears ache for rhyme, others are less exacting. But however great the expectation may be, it is not satisfied when a word is dragged in by the head and shoulders to furnish the rhyme: as in that otherwise magnificent sonnet of Wordsworth's:

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid *boon!*

(*b*) In the matter of rhymes, though never of rhythm, the eye does sometimes dictate to

the ear, and obliges it to accept 'move' as a rhyme for 'love', or 'strive' for 'live'. And, incidentally, 'mine' is still allowed to rhyme with 'join', because 'join' was pronounced by our forefathers 'jine'. In fact rhyme has become somewhat conventionalized, and the ear is reluctant to accept novelties, unless the effect is deliberately meant to be comic. Browning played with rhyme, as he played with rhythm, but less successfully.

(*c*) For this reason there is a tendency among modern poets to try to escape from rhyme and experiment with rhythm. The English language is fairly rich in rhyming words, but the number of rhymes to any given word is limited; in some cases, very limited. Hence, we get something very like rhyme-clichés. When, for instance, a line ends with 'life', the chances are strongly in favour of our finding 'strife' to rhyme with it. But in poetry, as in music, we do not want to know with too great a certainty what is going to follow. The obvious is apt to become the commonplace.

What is to be the future of rhyme, time only can show. But we may note that it is possible to have an exaggerated horror of the obvious; and that by a judicious use of place and rhythm the rhyme-cliché may be decently veiled from all but the most observant eyes—and ears.

7

THE MAGIC OF WORDS

WHENEVER we speak of magic, we tacitly admit that we are dealing with something which we cannot quite understand or explain. This is certainly true of what is here called the magic of words.

But there is no magic in isolated words. Some are obviously more melodious than others, hydrangia, splash, farewell, than eschscholtzia, squelch, so-long; Mesopotamia than Mespot. But melody is not magic.

And words are always changing. Several processes are constantly at work, which alter both their sense and their sound values. To take the sense values first.

(1) As the result of custom, words, which originally had several shades of meaning, get pinned down to one of them, and that not always the characteristic one. Thus to Milton 'silly thoughts' and 'fond thoughts' meant simple thought and foolish thoughts; to us they mean stupid thoughts and loving thoughts respectively.

(2) A lack of education, or a habit of inaccuracy, particularly noticeable in the daily press, either obliterates the distinction between words similar in sound, such as 'effect' and

'affect', or assigns to a word a meaning to which it has no claim. Thus, to 'aggravate' does not really mean to 'annoy'.

(3) A regrettable habit of exaggeration is constantly cheapening the value of words which express strong emotion, such as awful, frightful, terrible. To say that something is 'frightfully jolly' is fundamentally as absurd as to say that the weather is freezingly hot. Exaggeration always makes for the degradation of language.

(4) Through changes in our daily environment, words gradually acquire new associations. 'Tar', for instance, to many people has come to suggest, not merely a sticky black substance, but the early days of summer. It is conceivable that, if roads ceased to be covered with tar, the children of to-day would in their old age associate the smell of it with 'the days that are no more', and 'a tarry night' would have as great an emotional value in poetry as 'a starry night'.

The change in sound-values is due to a lazy habit, peculiar, I believe, to the English.

(*a*) Of clipping or otherwise mutilating words which offer any resistance to the tongue. Neither 'secretary' nor 'recognize' is a beautiful word; but they are preferable to 'seeketry' and 'reckernize'.

(*b*) Of degrading the vowel sounds. If one may judge from many of the voices (not those of the announcers) which reach the ear from

the studios of the British Broadcasting Company, the Cockney mispronunciation of the vowels is likely soon to become general, at least in the southern half of England. Comparatively few of the rising generation seem able to say 'our' or 'soon' without some trace of a Cockney modification.

All these changes have a bearing on poetry, present and future; for the value of words in poetry depends, partly on their sound and partly on their associations.

The English vocabulary contains many long melodious words, mostly of Latin origin: words of which Milton made a consummate use. But it is particularly rich in short, poignant, suggestive words, native to the soil, like 'death', 'breathe', 'sleep', 'home'. They are the music of lyric poetry, and they have no equivalents in French. It would be impossible to reproduce in that language the effect of 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun'. They are the words out of which Shakespeare made much of his greatest poetry, in such lines as,

> When we are born we cry, that we are come
> To this great stage of fools.

But in poetry, association is still more important than sound. When Keats wrote *Endymion*, his first version of the first line was,

> A thing of beauty is a constant joy.

The rhythm lays an emphasis on 'joy', and

the words do not amount to much more than the rather commonplace observation that beauty always gives us pleasure. On second thoughts he changed 'a constant joy' into 'a joy for ever', and at once the line became memorable. For three things happen as a result of the change:

(1) The change of rhythm removes from the line its faint resemblance to a copy-book maxim.

(2) The same change of rhythm shifts the stress from 'joy' on to 'for éver'.

(3) 'For ever' has more poetic associations than 'constant', and suggests that beauty is not merely a joy, but something infinite and eternal.

It is often said that, if poetry is to remain a living art, it must use the living language of its day; and that, no doubt, is true as an ideal. The difficulty of applying it at the present moment lies in the fact that it is the object of Poetry to create a sense of beauty, and what may be called the living language of to-day does not make for beauty; for it is largely the language of engineering and machinery, and we seem to have lost the art of coining musical words—even when we give a name to a new flower. Sparking-plug, half-watts, push-bike, dug-out, exhaust-pipe, are typical words of this 'living language' and they are not the kind of material from which melody flows. And when we come to consider association, the case

seems still more desperate. Transport and Industrialism, the most living interests of the day, are destroying, not creating, beauty, and machinery is inevitably connected in our minds with intolerable sounds and disagreeable smells. Tennyson could write of a sailing ship,

> I hear the noise about thy keel;
> I hear the bell struck in the night;
> I see the cabin-window bright;
> I see the sailor at the wheel;

and it was poetry. A motor-bicycle has noise, and a horn, and lamps, and a man at the wheel: but who could possibly make poetry out of them, when the 'noise', the horn, the man at the wheel, and even the lights, suggest something definitely unpleasant to all but the rider? What magic can there be in the language of machinery? It has not even produced a proverb.

And this, after a somewhat long digression, brings us back to the title of this chapter. What do we mean by 'the Magic of Words'?

In Browning's poem *Abt Vogler* it is said of music,

> But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,
> Existent behind all laws, that made them and, lo, they are!
> And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,
> That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.

Something of the same nature seems to happen at times in poetry. Words, when the poet is inspired, are used in a way that produces, not a sentence 'but a star'. Alter a word, change its place—and the star goes out. It is neither in the thought alone, nor in the words used to express it, nor in the rhythm, nor the melody, that the magic lies, but in some subtle harmony of all four. It is easier to feel the truth of this, than to explain it; and we experience it most often, I think, in Shakespeare, who more than any other poet possessed the power of weaving a spell with words.

Where feeling is involved, illustration is more helpful than analysis. Here are a few examples.

Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.
(*Romeo and Juliet.*)

Peace, peace!
Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
That sucks the nurse asleep?
(*Antony and Cleopatra.*)

The rest is silence. (*Hamlet.*)

and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins, who 's in, who 's out;
And take upon 's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies. (*King Lear.*)

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity. (SHELLEY.)

The winds come to me from the fields of sleep.
(WORDSWORTH.)

For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago. (WORDSWORTH.)

Cold in the earth—and fifteen wild Decembers
From those brown hills have melted into spring.
(EMILY BRONTË.)

Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.
(R. L. STEVENSON.)

If not in all, at least in some of these, the reader will feel what is meant by the magic of words.

8

THE RIGHT ATTITUDE TOWARDS POETRY

WHAT has been said about poetry in the previous pages is only a fraction of what might, and, perhaps, ought to be said. The illustrations have been drawn entirely from the works of dead poets, not because poetry died with them, but because they at least can no longer resent either criticism, or what they might regard as undiscerning praise. In this, the concluding chapter, we will deal briefly with the question: What should be our attitude towards poetry?

In the twentieth century, it can hardly help being a critical attitude. But, if our object is to enjoy poetry, not to condemn it, we shall be as little critical, and as catholic in our tastes as we can. Whenever we break new ground, we shall, so far as is possible, put ourselves into a receptive frame of mind, and 'give the fellow a chance'. At any rate, we can make an effort to rid ourselves of prejudice. Prejudice is likely to be of two kinds.

(1) The prejudices of middle-age. By the time that we reach forty, most of us have more or less consolidated our experience of life, and we do not like to have our conclusions

disturbed. In our day, perhaps, we have been counted as rebels, but we no longer smile on rebellion. We know what we like in poetry, in music, in art. We have our standards of what is good in them. Our ears no longer respond eagerly to new rhythms, nor our minds to new ideas. Our instinctive counsel to the young, if we find them indulging a taste for new wine, is to return to the old, because the old is better. 'Why waste your time over this modern rubbish, when you might be reading Shakespeare?'

Yet we know that history repeats itself, and it is a sobering thought that, if a new great poet were to arise, hardly any of us would recognize him. It seems incredible now, that anybody who knew and loved his Shakespeare could fail to admire the Odes of Keats and at least the Lyrics of Shelley. Incredible; but it happened. Lockhart and his contemporary reviewers were men of taste and often of wide reading; yet, after bludgeoning Keats and Shelley, they whipped Tennyson into ten years of moody silence, with a cheap and unintelligent humour that would be distressing in a lower-school boy; and all because they thought that he was modelling himself on Keats! The poet recovered from the whipping, and lived to receive adulation for some of his worst performances; but the critics proceeded to use their whips on Browning and on Swinburne.

The Scotch Reviewers of the early nineteenth century were supposed to have hastened Keats's end. 'The event was dire', and the reaction from it has been equally unhappy; for some modern reviewers are so much haunted by the fear of *not* discerning genius, so eager to be first with their homage, that they mistake the glare of a cigarette-end for the rising sun. It was so sound and learned a critic as the late Sir Edmund Gosse who hailed Stephen Phillips as a second Shakespeare. The years from 1890 onwards are strewn with stars that failed to rise.

So there is evidently both a Scylla and a Charybdis. How is middle-age to steer its way in safety between the two? It must take its chance. But it is well to be conscious that both are there, and that, of the two, Scylla is probably the greater peril.

(2) The prejudices of youth are equally natural to its years. Youth is never really averse from discipline, but it does not like to have its tastes in literature or art dictated to it. It revolts from the tradition of the elders, when that tradition is presented to it, not as a suggestion, but as a law. It likes to make its own discoveries; to wander into fields beyond the ken of its pastors and masters. And, when it has found new gods, it is apt to worship them with an almost excessive fervour, and to deride the old ones. The great poets of the

past suffer some diminution in its eyes from being taught at school. But they are great enough to bear it.

Old and young, we all have our preferences, and we can confess them unashamedly. But we need not be too dogmatic about them. If it is true that 'we needs must love the highest when we see it', it is not true, at any age, that we necessarily love it at first sight. And experience teaches us that our first love is not always our last. In any case, poetry is not a creed, and it is possible for a man to serve many masters. Indeed, the more he serves, the better; and I do not think it matters much with whom he begins. If he can enjoy *any* poetry, he is on the way to enjoying all.

But, while we cultivate modesty, and make a pious sacrifice of our prejudices, we need not at the same time offer our common sense, or our sense of the ridiculous on the altar.

Sunset.

stinging
gold swarms
upon the spires
silver

  chants the litanies the
great bells are ringing with rose
the lewd fat bells
  and a tall

wind
is dragging
the
sea

with
dream
-S

When this kind of thing is presented to us as poetry, we shall conjecture that the 'poet' is pulling our leg. Not with such strains, nor printed thus, will the next great poet demand a hearing.

But can there ever be a next great poet? Has not everything that can be said, been said already, and said well? Has not every form of beauty been explored and exploited?

These doubts have been expressed before in nearly every age, and in every age they might, conceivably, have been true, if human life had reached its culminating point. But life is never stationary. The world, which always seems to be growing old, is in reality always becoming something new. And, in the process, values are continually changing. New aspects of truth emerge from old ones, new forms of beauty struggle for expression. Even to-day, in an environment of harsh and hideous noises, to which the genius of mechanical science is daily adding sounds more harsh and hideous still,

silence has come to mean something which it never meant before, and which has not yet been expressed in words; and, on a rubbish heap amid the degradation of some industrial area, the speedwell takes on an almost unearthly significance and beauty. Nor need we be so pessimistic as to suppose that the poetry of the future will have to subsist on such violent contrasts as these. In the spirit of man, as in Nature, there is an indwelling force which makes for beauty, and which prevails at the long last. Out of the present welter of noise and ugliness and commercialism, the human spirit will create something less unworthy of itself—and there will be new poetry.

But what is new in human achievement, if it is to be enduring, must have its roots deep in the past. A great poet is an originator, because he has an original mind—the rarest of rare gifts; but he is not a new creation. He has always stood, and presumably always will stand, in the direct line of succession.

It is well that we should be clear in our minds about the true meaning of originality. To a limited extent, and for a limited time, the accident of birth compels us all to appear to be original. We come into the world singly and as individuals, and our first experiences of life are first-hand experiences. Having very imperfect means of communicating with other minds, we are obliged, in a rudimentary way,

to do our thinking for ourselves. At this stage, without any conscious guile, we raise unfounded expectations in our fond parents, who mistake our *naïveté* for genius, and see in us the stuff out of which great poets and great artists are made. These illusory hopes are brought to the ground, not by the malign influence of unintelligent adults, in the shape of schoolmasters, but by the fact that, though we are born singly, we are also born gregarious; that is to say, with a strong predisposition *not* to think for ourselves, but to adopt the opinions of the herd, and to see with its eyes; in fact, not to create, but to imitate. And the beginning of this process can be discerned at a very early age.

> Behold the child among his new-born blisses,
> A six years' darling of a pigmy size!
> See, where mid work of his own hand he lies,
> Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,
> With light upon him from his father's eyes;
> See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
> Some fragment from his dream of human life,
> Shaped by himself with newly learned art,
> A wedding or a festival,
> A mourning or a funeral,
> And this hath now his heart,
> And unto this he frames his song;
> Then will he fit his tongue
> To dialogues of business, love, or strife:
> But it will not be long

Ere this be thrown aside,
And with new joy and pride
The little actor cons another part:
Filling from time to time his 'humorous stage'
With all the persons, down to palsied age,
That life brings with her in her equipage,
As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation.

A capacity for endless imitation: that is the problem with which education has to deal; and, if it deals successfully, it teaches us to discard the worst of the herd-prejudices and to exercise an independent judgement. But independence is not originality; nor is eccentricity, that conscious reaction of egotism from the herd-instinct, which prompts a man to cultivate and advertise some startling idiosyncrasy which will differentiate him from his fellows.

Originality is a quality which can never be acquired. The original man is one who is born nearer to the truth of things than the rest of us. He sees as the obvious, what to others is obscure or even invisible. And not only does he see with his own eyes, but he cannot see otherwise, and for that reason he is seldom, if ever, conscious of being original.

The next great poet will be nearer to the heart of things than his fellows. The present moment does not seem to be propitious for his birth. Yet who can say what the heart of things really is? When we complain that there is

nothing new to be said, it only means that *we* have nothing new to say. Meanwhile, there is an accumulated wealth of English poetry, old and new; and, probably, nine people out of every ten are capable of enjoying it.

What a rich treasure-house it is, and how little use we make of it.

By the Same Author

ABOUT SHAKESPEARE AND HIS PLAYS. Oxford University Press.

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aggravate = search meaning: (P84)